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P. Kourilsky, G. Valentis and N. Caïd

Introduction

- 1 Many actors intervene in developing countries and in the most impoverished areas of emerging and developed countries to overcome problems related to poverty, health, education, the environment and to development issues as a whole. Governmental and non-governmental organizations, public and private, national and international institutions are engaged in many actions in the field. Too often, these actions are insufficiently evaluated and communication, cooperation and/or coordination between actors suffer from a lack of efficiency and synergy.
- 2 As a result, knowledge and know-how acquired through field actions is poorly capitalised. The resources dedicated to access to essential services and the preservation of the environment are not used optimally, or are in part wasted all while being limited. Errors are reproduced while best practices are not. Often, the promotion of these best practices is not sufficiently emphasized. Many efforts have been made to remedy this situation. They have led to improvements but remain insufficient in many cases.

The principle of the initiative

- 3 Our work hypothesis¹ is to consider field actions as a whole as a domain that is at a pre-scientific stage. In this perspective, the community of actors that operate in the field would greatly benefit from the adoption of a certain number of rules that prevail within the scientific community where they have proven their effectiveness.
- 4 In many scientific domains, researchers carry out experiments that are reported on in a format approved by the scientific community and published in scientific journals after

having followed a peer review process. This system provides an efficient evaluation mechanism while guaranteeing communication. It respects the freedom of the actors and generates emulation as it does cooperation. It favors the recognition of best practices, those of researchers, their teams and the institutions to which they belong.

- 5 Moreover, the scientific community organizes other actions centered on communication, training and the distribution of best practices for the benefit of its members through colloquiums, training sessions, awards etc. It is through these mechanisms that have proven their effectiveness for several decades that the community structures itself on the international level from the bottom up. On the other hand, funding organizations intervene from the top down although they partly base their estimations and decisions on the evaluations (i.e. to a great extent the publications) generated by the community itself.
- 6 This has led us to conclude that if the field actors implemented similar mechanisms this would result in better communication, better capitalization of knowledge and practices, and better recognition. Neither the freedom of the actors nor their desire to cooperate would be hindered. Failing such international and largely self-managed mode of organization, top-down approaches have proven insufficient, in particular in the evaluation of programs based in part on the many and diverse field actions. To illustrate the parallel, we might ask how research funding agencies (as the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the United States or the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (National Research Agency) (ANR) in France) would operate and fulfill their mission if there were no scientific publications. Undoubtedly, they would face immense difficulties, like those experienced by the international organizations, national institutions and NGOs who fund actions in the field.
- 7 The FACTS (Field ACTIONs Science) Initiative was developed to help field actors to appropriate operational rules that have proven their usefulness and effectiveness in the scientific domain. If we assimilate action in the field to a science (which until now ignores that it is one), then it is interesting to analyze how new scientific fields emerge. In general, the time comes when a small number of recognized actors respected on an international level in an entirely new discipline agree to organize scientific meetings and create a new specialized journal. In our case, this process cannot be set up spontaneously since it requires this culture intrinsic to the scientific community that is precisely lacking in the community of field actors.
- 8 Before setting up the FACTS Initiative, it was essential to obtain the opinions of a greater number of field actors. Many exchanges took place with representatives of developing countries and NGOs. Feedback was quasi-unanimously positive. The project was deemed ambitious insofar as it requires and induces a cultural change in the community of field actors that appears to be as vast as it is heterogeneous. However, the utility of the project was recognised as essential.
- 9 Several representatives of major international organizations took an interest in the Initiative. They acknowledge that significant amounts are spent without there being a satisfactory evaluation and with only relative effectiveness. In their opinion, the FACTS Initiative could contribute to a better use of available resources.

FACTS reports: its concept, its field of action and its editorial committees

The Concept

- 10 This positive and constructive feedback reinforced the idea of actually launching the FACTS Initiative and enriched it with useful suggestions. The highest priority was assigned to the creation of FACTS Reports, an international electronic journal dedicated to field actions and featuring a peer review process.
- 11 The choice resulted from the following considerations:
- The launch of such a journal meets the main objectives of the Global Initiative.
 - It is not exclusive of other activities (conferences, training, colloquiums, etc.) that will support the development of the journal.
 - The electronic nature of the journal is a guarantee of project feasibility insofar as: 1) It imposes no limit on the scope and volume of activities considered for the journal; 2) Electronic classification is flexible and allows any type of user to find the information of interest; 3) In the appropriate conditions, the peer review process can be open, such that the reports of referral agents can enrich the article, just as a selection of comments from other field actors can be added progressively to the initial publication; 4) Costs can be maintained at a relatively low level; thus it is not unrealistic to consider an entirely free journal both for the authors and the readers ; and finally 5) Internet is becoming accessible in the most isolated areas of the planet although there are in many places, a limited throughput.

The Scope of the Journal

- 12 After discussion, it was concluded that FACTS Reports would initially cover the classic themes of intervention in developing countries such as health, the economy, education, agriculture and the environment. Subsequently, opening the themes to issues concerning the underprivileged areas of developing countries, as suggested by some, is not excluded.
- 13 As the field concerned is vast, it was agreed to proceed in stages, to set up dedicated Editorial Committees and to begin by publishing contributions from the corresponding fields. Health, a field impregnated by scientific culture, was the first theme developed.
- 14 The approach chosen was thus pragmatic. Additional themes can be launched when motivated editorial groups take charge of them. The various operational fields will thus progressively be covered by a growing number of Editorial Committees. In the end, they will be interconnected and a structure whose function would be to coordinate and supervise the different Committees will be set up.

The Peers and the Editorial Committees

- 15 The members of the Editorial Committees and the peers engaged in the peer review process are themselves actors in the field. This point is critical. For example, an article describing local action implemented by the Red Cross is reviewed by a local expert of another country or a member of another NGO. It will be up to no other community than that of field operators to control the process.

- 16 The constitution of Editorial Committees is thus crucial for the success of the Initiative. As in any scientific domain, the members of Editorial Committees must be experienced field actors and recognized for their expertise. Their role is either to evaluate the quality of the articles submitted to them or distribute them to other peers and verify the editorial pertinence of the remarks made by the latter. This is the condition for obtaining fair opinions and for building a quality review recognized as a whole. We are considering, although this has not yet been set up, publishing the reports of the referral agents and the comments of the readers, with their consent, to accumulate a body of knowledge around the initial article.
- 17 A global framework of instructions to authors has been developed. To a certain extent it can be adapted by each Editorial Committee to correspond to the specificities of each domain. A certain freedom of experimentation can be enriching for the FACTS Report journal, as long as none of the procedures tested undermines the overall quality and reputation of the journal.

Definition of Quality Criteria

- 18 The preceding reflections raise the difficult and unavoidable question of the choice of quality standards. As this is a new field and as it involves communities unfamiliar with these processes, promoting from the outset an excessively elitist profile based on criteria of “excellence” that are in any case difficult to define, particularly in an emerging field, presents a risk. The approach selected consists in publishing useful and reproducible work whose primary and indispensable quality would be to be based on a serious factual description such that it could be reproduced by others.

A Prototype Article

- 19 To illustrate the type of work that, according to our criteria, deserves publication, we refer to the article written at our request by the members of an NGO on a mobile laboratory they designed to run analyses relating to the meningitis epidemic in Africa in the southern belt of the Sahel. The case is exemplary because the results of the epidemiological study were published in a scientific journal of great renown without reference to the mobile laboratory which, in practice, has facilitated or made possible the obtainment of these results. However, the practical knowledge acquired on this occasion could be useful. This model was placed on-line on the FACTS Initiative website in 2008².

Articles, Editorials and Opinions

- 20 Our discussions with field actors showed us that the latter sincerely wished to have a forum for expression. FACTS Reports will thus also publish editorials and viewpoints. These types of features are also found in many major scientific journals.

Problems and solutions

Objections

- 21 If the overall concept of the FACTS Initiative was positively and enthusiastically received, it did give rise to a certain number of objections related more to feasibility rather than to principle. The deficit in the capitalization of knowledge and practices and its related wide-ranging negative consequences has been identified for a long time and many efforts have been made to remedy it. Why would FACTS succeed where others have failed? What are the factors that hindered earlier attempts? Have certain difficulties been underestimated? The remarks were essentially as follows:
- There is nothing truly new in the Initiative; it risks failing as have previous attempts.
 - The field actors have no experience in writing according to scientific standards and are not familiar with the peer review system.
 - Even if they are capable, field actors operating in urgent situations do not have the necessary motivation to write.

Originality of FACTS Reports and the FACTS Initiative

- 22 Many organizations, including NGOs, produce their own publications and some of them devote significant efforts to reporting on their best practices and achievements. A comparative study identified a great many publications some of which include a serious peer review system, but which is internal to the organization such that, for better or worse, the quality and even more the independence of the information delivered (as opposed to the message intended to collect funds that in certain cases can be biased) are not necessarily guaranteed.
- 23 Very few journals call upon peers to evaluate the articles. Their scope is limited and the peers more often belong to the scientific community than to that of field actors themselves.
- 24 The originality of FACTS Reports results from the combination of two factors:
1. The journal is formally supported and fed by field actors and is not organized from the top down as are many evaluation tools.
 2. It is electronic which truly guarantees, as previously emphasized, the credibility and feasibility of the project.

Do field actors lack experience in scientific writing?

- 25 Many field actors lack experience in scientific writing. This poses a serious problem. Writing an article according to scientific standards by following basic rules, like separating facts from their discussion, is a skill that is taught to any young researcher.
- 26 But even in a well-organized scientific community, this learning process takes time.
- 27 To overcome this difficulty, one of the solutions is to mobilize volunteers within the scientific community to help the authors with their writing if they request it. Electronic communication makes possible an objective that would otherwise be hard to reach. Thus a scientist can devote a few hours of his/her time to helping an author operating in Mali

or Eritrea to structure a report on his/her work. There must be no misunderstanding in this regard. The role of the scientist is to guide the writing not to intervene on its content. In this way specific competence on the exact topic is not necessary.

- 28 Many contacts were thus established with representatives of the academic world. Researchers are in the habit of devoting a non-negligible proportion of their time to the common good, in particular by participating in peer reviews, and are prone to participate in generous initiatives. As a result, the development of a “Writing Aid Bureau” appears realistic and is among the development objectives of FACTS Reports.

Do field actors lack the motivation to report on their work and publish it?

- 29 This is another major issue that refers to the specificity of field actions themselves; in particular when they are carried out in an emergency situation. Two approaches can be favored:
1. It is up to the institutions and organizations concerned to spread the message according to which publishing is, and will progressively become, a positive factor of individual and collective promotion. NGOs could reap, significant benefits by encouraging the publication of work done by certain of their members. Scientists generally publish their successes rather than their failures. Likewise, field actors are invited to publish and be acknowledged for their successful experiences, their organizations legitimately benefiting from this approach. For example, with time, an NGO could improve its collection of funds by highlighting its good publication activity.
 2. Several types of incentives can be considered. Positive publicity could be given to a selection of actions and/or field actors through various mechanisms. As a result, these promotional measures coincide with one of the goals of the Initiative; that is improving the recognition of field actors and actions.

Progress report (Spring 2009)

- 30 In the spring of 2009, about sixty articles were received, roughly eighteen successfully passed examination by the peers. The site of the journal is available at www.factsreports.org.
- 31 Many promising long term collaborations were developed, among others with Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors without Borders) (MSF), the Global Development Network (GDN), l'Agence Française de Développement (French Development Agency) (AFD), California universities including San Francisco and Berkeley, Helen Keller International, the Children Global Health Initiative, CARE, and Save the Children.
- 32 To develop this cooperation, two international events were organized. A special parallel session was dedicated to FACTS Reports during the annual Global Development Network conference held February 3 – 5, 2009 that gathered 700 participants, major development actors, in Kuwait. This session enabled the promotion and presentation of useful and reproducible field actions, while making known the concept of the Initiative to a wide public.
- 33 Likewise, an international workshop on FACTS Reports was organized during the BioVision Conference, World Life Sciences Forum, held from March 8 to 11, 2009 in Lyon,

France. This conference, that is held every two years, draws several thousand participants from around the world, including NGOs, development actors and international organizations. The main goal of this FACTS Reports workshop was to allow members of NGOs to promote their best practices in terms of field action, but also to dialogue with members of other communities. About twenty field actors from different NGOs across the globe (Helen Keller, CARE, Save the Children, Solthis, MSF, Solidarité, Ashoka, Center for Environment Education, GDN, etc.) were able to give an exposé on the results of their project carried out in a developing country. The corresponding articles were submitted for publication in FACTS Reports.

- 34 Discussions were engaged with the NGOs and international organizations to encourage their members to participate in the FACTS Initiative. Other actions are being prepared: conferences, prizes, training sessions, colloquiums etc. Several incentive mechanisms will be implemented, mainly thanks to the promotion and recognition of the projects of development actors.
- 35 Finally, new Editorial Committees will soon be set up to cover other domains such as agricultural practices, the environment etc.

Conclusion

- 36 The FACTS Initiative took form in early 2009. It is welcome by the many members of NGOs, international organizations, development agencies and civilian society contacted as a unique, important even essential initiative because it offers a forum for communication, exchange, capitalization and the promotion of best practices of field actors and the organizations that support them. This is achieved in a neutral and independent context that is based on the peer review process. These peers are qualified editors, recognized both for their field experience but also for their scientific knowledge thereby guaranteeing the quality of the information.
- 37 The FACTS Initiative will constitute a platform for dialogue, cooperation and coordination for NGOs but also for international organizations and national development agencies.

NOTES

1. Ph.Kourilsky - « Optimiser l'action de la France pour l'amélioration de la santé mondiale : Le cas de la surveillance et de la recherche sur les maladies infectieuses » (Optimizing the action of France for the improvement of world health: The case of the surveillance of and research on infectious diseases) (Report to the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Research and Health and Solidarity 2006).
2. "Mobile laboratory to improve response to meningitis epidemic, Burkina Faso epidemic season 2004" - R. T. Ouedraogo, B.-M. Njanpop-Lafourcade, P. Jaillard, Y. Traoré, J. E. Mueller, J.-F. Aguilera, M. Dabal, S. R. Tiendrébéogo, W. Goehde, A. da Silva, B. D. Gessner, and P. Stoeckel - Field Actions Science Reports, Volume 1, July 2009